

GELATIN

Greene Naftali

The four members of the Austrian collective Gelatin (formerly Gelitin)—Wolfgang Gantner, Ali Janka, Florian Reither, and Tobias Urban—claim to have met at summer camp as children, a fitting, if perhaps apocryphal, origin story for artists who have made juvenile schoolboy antics their signature. For their first exhibition at Greene Naftali, “Blind Sculpture,” in 2010, Gelatin staged an eight-day happening in the gallery, during which they constructed a sprawling assemblage out of assorted junk while wearing blindfolds and little else. A roving cast of assistants, including Urs Fischer and Liam Gillick, handed them things (materials, hammers, booze) and generally tried to prevent gruesome accidents from occurring, while the audience watched the absurdist performance from bleachers installed around the gallery’s perimeter. Their 2012 follow-up, “The Fall Show,” took an equally chaotic form: the artists created a mazelike arrangement of seventeen precarious sculptures on pedestals, each of which was outfitted with a lever that, when pushed, would send the work crashing to the ground. Each day, the gallery assistants were tasked with reassembling the battered pieces, which repeatedly cycled over the course of the exhibition from trash to sculpture and back again.

“New York Golem,” Gelatin’s most recent exhibition at the gallery, featured forty-two small, crudely formed ceramic sculptures placed on individual pedestals MacGyvered from an impressive range of materials: bits of wood, wire, plaster, Styrofoam, old furniture, and found objects. Upending the conventional relationship between the artwork and its display apparatus, the sculptures were far less interesting than their supports: whereas the ceramics were relatively uniform in size and appearance, the eclectic bases cannibalized any number of sculptural tropes, from the uncanny objects of Surrealist assemblage to the modular forms of Minimalism. In one pedestal, the artists embedded an upside-down chair in a flowerpot, with a flat panel balancing delicately on one leg; others took the form of pillars made of stacked buckets, ceramic tiles, or seat cushions covered in concrete. Several alluded more directly to the body, with plaster casts of limbs attached to planks of wood. One, a leaning columnar form in white plaster with horizontal protrusions on its back, even suggested a vestigial *Nike of Samothrace*.

Compared to Gelatin’s previous exhibitions, “New York Golem” appeared almost sedate. Walking through the apparently hijinks-free gallery, I wondered if the artists—now pushing fifty years old—had decided it was finally time to grow up. That is, until I read the press release, which specified that the ceramics had been “molded by gelatin’s genitals and sometimes through the behind.” It was accompanied by a photograph of the artists enthusiastically fucking mounds of clay in the studio, their naked bodies smeared with excremental layers of paint and slip.



Gelatin: *New York Golem*, 2017, clay pot, acrylic resin, wood, plexiglass, and glazed ceramic, 55½ by 33½ by 27½ inches; at Greene Naftali.

In Jewish legend, a golem is a clay creature animated by kabbalistic magic—in some versions, by shoving a slip of paper bearing one of the secret names of God into its mouth. Gelatin’s take is more profane, in both senses of the word. I’ll admit to finding their brand of sophomoric humor exhausting (as if we need another illustration of the unchecked male id let loose in the public sphere). But Gelatin’s clay sculptures also take up a myth of another kind: that of the male artist genius, whose sheer creative force allows him to give life to dumb matter. In “New York Golem,” the artists literalized that fantasy of virile power, but nothing came to life. The ceramics aren’t just ugly and misshapen, but almost insistently boring, since they look exactly like what they are: lumps of clay presented without any pretense of artistry or technical skill.

—Rachel Wetzler